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Rediscovering Civil War Classics:The Lincoln Nobody Knows

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Feature Essay

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Current, Richard N. *REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS: The Lincoln Nobody Knows*. Greenwood Press Reprint, \$82.50; (Availability: Out of Stock) ISBN 313224501

Lincoln for the ages

45 years old, and still current

I will cheerfully admit to a long, highly personal, and undiminished attachment to a book called **The Lincoln Nobody Knows** (originally published by McGraw-Hill, 1958), along with an admiration that has grown into deep affection for its author, Richard Nelson Current. In writing about it, I could not begin to conceal my biases. Nor would I want to. How else to say it? The book changed my life. In fact, its presence in my hands and heart has unexpectedly, but wonderfully, bracketed my entire 40-plus years of experience in the Lincoln field: from my time as a grade school student searching for an interest, to the day just last spring when I was marking the publication of my own 23rd book, *Lincoln at Cooper Union*, and received a wonderful gift to cap the celebration--a special new copy of **The Lincoln Nobody Knows**.

Thus when *CWBR* editor Frank Hardie asked me to fill David Madden's spot this issue with a guest column on my favorite classic book on the Civil War era, I did not hesitate in making my choice. **The Lincoln Nobody Knows** was the very first Lincoln book I ever read, and I re-read it just before sitting down to write this appreciation. Is it as good as I remembered? Not exactly; it's better.

I initially made the acquaintance of the book with its alluring black dust jacket as a fifth-grader at the Louis Pasteur School in Little Neck, Queens in early 1959. Our teacher, a tiny fireball named Henrietta Janke, decided that we must learn the art of biography, so she filled her hat with slips of paper bearing the names of some of history's great men and women, and barked at us to line up in the schoolroom aisle to pick our subjects at random. When my turn came, I

dove into Mrs. Janke's hat and came up with Lincoln. My best friend, next in line, chose Genghis Khan. This would explain, I suppose, why he grew up to be a rock and roll promoter and I followed the path into American history. Of course, 1959 was also the year of the Lincoln Sesquicentennial, and I had already collected a set of commemorative stamps marking his 150th birthday; I was ripe for the hooking.

Our assigned subject identified, we were herded into the vast-looking library of the junior high school--whose new building we shared--to comb the open shelves for books to help us research our assignments. Once again, fate must have guided me, because my vision turned immediately to the spine of **The Lincoln Nobody Knows** and its stark yellow-and-white lettering against a jet-black background. I drew it down and opened it--the first person to crack this particular copy of the new publication, as I remember it. Not only was the book title intriguing, so were its individual chapter headings: The Most Shut-Mouthed Man, The Instrument of God, The Bringer of War, The Master Politician, The Peacemaker, and The Martyr and the Myth, to name a few.

In my contrary way (even then!), I of course decided to read the last chapter first, and here was not only exposed for the first time to Richard Current's crisp, authoritative writing style, but also to the novelty of counter-factual history. The chapter began with a long description of Abraham Lincoln's brave but frustrating second term in the presidency: four years marked by battles with fellow Republicans, Congressional vetoes, fractures in the Cabinet, and a cruel policy of throwing the freedmen to the to the wolves, of leaving them to the tender mercies of their former masters (271). Of course, it was all conjectural, and I'm not even sure, four decades after reading it for the first time, whether I agree that Lincoln would have moved so far in a hypothetical second term from his historic commitment to freedom. But the very idea, so audaciously conceived and powerfully composed, of speculating about what might have been gripped me then and there--and for all time. Here, uniquely presented, was an explanation for the mystery and myth that clouded the Lincoln story.

And here was Current's dazzling way of introducing the story of the Lincoln murder--not only because it was the crime of the century, but because it remained a garish, bloodstained glass, in which all perspectives are distorted, and the over-all view dimmed. Lincoln's whole life, explained the author, tends to become obscured by the circumstances of his death (273). Not much has changed in five decades. Needless to say, Current managed in the final pages of

his book to debunk most of the absurd myths about the assassination, including the ugly speculation--sadly revived in recent years--that Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, one of Lincoln's most ardent admirers, conspired in his murder. Scholars in the Current era were unaware of subsequently unearthed documentation rather convincingly attesting to John Wilkes Booth's onetime association with the Confederate secret service, yet Current was at his best when he reminded readers that, however conceived, the assassination plot reflected the workings of a crazy actor's diseased mind (276): illogically, and dangerously, staging his attack inside a theater simply because the actor had to have an audience. Current admitted of no broader plot to eliminate Lincoln--and informed by decades of further investigation, it is still impossible to prove that a well-organized, official murder scheme really ever existed--and ended his masterful chapter by observing tartly: The mystery, if any, lies in the fact that he was not assassinated sooner than he was (277). At least, Current pointed out, Lincoln did not suffer the kind of prosaic death that Washington had experienced: 12 years after leaving office, felled rather un-heroically by strep throat.

I am not sure a better essay has ever been written about Abraham Lincoln's personality than Current's opening section, *The Most Shut-Mouthed Man*. Here, after admitting that it was nearly impossible to create a vivid word portrait of how Lincoln really looked, sounded, and moved--despite the avalanche of period recollections about one quirky detail or another--Current proceeded to do precisely that. The Lincoln that emerged from his chapter lived, breathed, spoke, laughed, wept, and thought. Cobbling together evidence and impressions, Current fashioned Lincoln as he had never before inhabited a page: yearning, striving, loving, thinking, and living, albeit clumsily inside a gigantic body ill-clad in badly fitting clothes. For 20 pages or so, it almost seemed as if this man of many secrets had shared them with his biographer. But Current never abandoned his overarching theme--that the more one knows about Lincoln, the more one wants to know, and the more unknowable the details (13). There was no last word about what kind of man Lincoln really was (21).

In the chapters between these first and last sections, Current painted a provocative and occasionally contrarian view of Lincoln: the compassionate pardoner who could also say no with as much decisiveness as any chief executive in American history, a master politician who nonetheless remained a steadfast friend of freedom, and a man slow to anger who was ready to bring war rather than let the Union dissolve. But Current was decisive about an issue he

later expanded into another book (*Lincoln and the First Shot*, 1962): Lincoln was far less a plotter of war-bringing maneuvers than some of the Confederates themselves. And he was no more the aggressor in the conflict than any of the Confederates were. Lincoln was neither a military genius, nor a politically motivated meddler, and Current artfully presents both sides of that still-unresolved mystery, asking whether Lincoln was the greatest--or one of the most inept of commanders-in-chief (160). Half a century before historian Geoffrey Perret devoted an entire book to advancing precisely the same argument, Current observed: Lincoln pioneered in the creation of a high command, an organization for amassing all the energies and resources of a people in the grand strategy of total war (162). Historian Mark E. Neely may since have offered convincing evidence that the war was in fact less than total. But no one--including Perret, in the newest and most comprehensive study--has sifted through the evidence and reached a conclusion markedly different from Current's 1958 assessment of Lincoln as commander-in-chief.

The genius of Current's book--for a wide-eyed ten-year-old, and for a seasoned historian--is in its equal doses of decisiveness and what I might call canny inconclusiveness. For areas still shrouded in mystery, Current was not afraid to tell his readers that he did not know the answers, and that Lincoln's lifelong shrewdness about keeping his views close to the vest might make it impossible ever to know for sure. Yet in some areas--like Reconstruction (a subject about which Current would later write in more detail in both *Those Terrible Carpetbaggers* and *Lincoln's Loyalists*)--he is certain: Lincoln would not have approved the over-conciliatory peace terms formulated between Union General William T. Sherman and Confederate General Joseph Johnston, for example, because it bargained away emancipation. And Lincoln would certainly have consented to military reconstruction of the South. If his generals objected to either, Current wrote, Lincoln would have overruled them when the showdown came (265).

Such a showdown never came, of course, because the living, breathing man was catapulted into the realm of folklore on Good Friday, 1865. Americans were left to worship--and speculate. Hero-worship seems to be a vanishing cultural phenomenon. Increasingly sophisticated, cynical, media-saturated Americans are more reluctant than ever to lavish devotion on mere politicians. We have been disappointed too often.

But modern readers will not be disappointed to gaze back nearly 50 years to reconsider one of the most bracing, audacious, and authoritative Lincoln books ever written--then, as now, a superb introduction so comprehensive on major points that it constitutes a biography. New scholarship has added layers of fresh meaning and interpretation to the arguments Current boldly made in 1958, but a 21st century Lincoln student will search in vain for any major errors in this durable book, and will surely note that in several historiographical instances, enough time has passed that some of Current's contentions were dismissed or corrected so long ago that they have now been re-corrected, coming full cycle back to the positions the author first advocated in the days when Eisenhower was president.

It is surely worth noting how this wonderful book came to be--and what Richard Current produced in the years that followed. Before creating **The Lincoln Nobody Knows**, Current had been asked to complete the late James G. Randall's monumental four-volume history of Lincoln's presidency. Current took hold of *Lincoln the President: Last Full Measure* and, publishing it under both scholars' names, turned it into a Bancroft Prize winner. Yet Current finished the project armed with an array of research he had not used in the book, or felt constrained about assessing within the Randall-established format. The result was **The Lincoln Nobody Knows**, which fully established Current as a giant Lincoln scholar in his own right.

Current went on to serve as University Distinguished Professor of History at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, among other faculty positions, and as President of the Southern Historical Association, and lectured at colleges and universities throughout the world. His other books include *Speaking of Abraham Lincoln: The Man and His Meaning for Our Times*, and *Arguing with Historians: Essays on the Historical and the Unhistorical*. Eventually he earned the title, Dean of Lincoln Scholars, and went on to earn from the Abraham Lincoln Association the prestigious, seldom-awarded Logan Hay Prize for lifetime achievement in 1989. The following year, I asked Richard Current to serve as one of the contributing scholars for a project organized and co-edited by New York Governor Mario Cuomo to assemble Lincoln's greatest words on freedom, liberty, and opportunity for a new book called *Lincoln on Democracy*.

Typically, Richard Current provided a sterling introduction for the section on Lincoln and the Race for President, and by lending his name and expertise to the project deserves much of the praise for the book's success: over the years it

has been published in Polish, Japanese, Indonesian, and Hebrew, and was republished in a new edition by Fordham University Press in fall 2004.

But he was no by means finished with his work. In 1997, Current and his wife, Marcia Ewing Current, published a sterling biography of the mesmerizing dance star *Loie Fuller: Goddess of Light*. And then, even more remarkably, he turned--at the age of 90-plus--to translating the works of Norwegian writer Knut Hamsun for a volume issued in 2003. Current, ever ambitious and daring, not only wrote the introduction, but also translated all of Hamsun's writings from the original Norwegian into English.

I might add, wearing my other hat as vice chairman of The Lincoln Forum, that our annual achievement award was renamed in 1998 The Richard Nelson Current Lincoln Forum award. That year, regrettably, Dick Current was unable to travel to Gettysburg for the yearly symposium, but he did speak to our attendees by phone, and was saluted by award winner and fellow nonagenarian John Hope Franklin. By the way: he has attended every Lincoln Forum since. *Speaking of Lincoln*--or of *Arguing with Historians*--some of his most famous titles, I have seen Richard Current do both. He gave a vivid lecture at Gettysburg that both Governor Cuomo and I got to hear in 1989. He has addressed symposia at Lincoln Memorial University and Springfield. And in private colloquia with fellow scholars, I have listened in awe as he has hurled cryptic darts at poseurs and offered brisk explanations of his own contentions. He can be tough, too.

But this venerable Norwegian can also be warm and generous. Last spring, when my *Cooper Union* book hit the stores, I got an unexpected call from the great man's loyal and lovely wife, Marcia. Dick, physically frail though mentally sharp as ever, wanted me to have a gift. It turned out to be a beautifully bound, royal blue, tooled-leather edition of **The Lincoln Nobody Knows**, its title gold-stamped on a handsome spine.

Accompanying this exquisite, one-of-a-kind volume, was a typed letter on Richard Current's stationery, and I hope neither he nor Marcia will object if I repeat some of it here:

Remember the good old days when a publisher used to send the author, as a gift for the holiday season, a nicely bound copy of his book? it began. (Actually, no, I'd never heard of such a thing--couldn't even imagine such a tradition--are publishers and editors listening?)

Well, here is what McGraw-Hill sent me late in 1958. I can't hoard it much longer and have decided to give it to someone who might enjoy having it.

Typically, here was perfect understatement of the Richard Current kind. In truth, I felt not only enjoyment--but also profound indebtedness to this grand scholar for giving me such a wonderful memento of my inspiration--the very first Lincoln book I ever read, in the one-of-a-kind special edition that had been created for its esteemed author. I will treasure it as long as I live. But anyone who reads this book, in any of its several editions, cloth or paper, is sure to treasure it as well. It remains fresh, controversial, gripping, and richly satisfying. Written half a century ago by a man now four score and ten years old, it is, precisely like its author--how else to say it?--Current.

Harold Holzer has co-authored 23 books on Lincoln and the Civil War. He is co-chairman of the U.S. Lincoln Bicentennial Commission and vice chairman of The Lincoln Forum.